The Frontier Thesis

In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner presented a paper at the Chicago World's Fair entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." The Frontier (Turner) Thesis dramatically altered the course of historical inquiry by rejecting the accepted method of understanding American history. Prior to the Turner Thesis, historians believed the American experience could best be understood by studying the alteration of European "germs" in the American environment. That is, American history was viewed as a reaction to what was going on in Europe rather than anything new or different. Turner suggested that the proper way to understand U.S. history was by studying the impact of the frontier on American institutions. In his own words

"The existence of an area of free land, its continual recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development."

Turner defined the frontier as "the meeting point between savagery and civilization" as opposed to the European concept of the frontier being the established fortified boundaries between developed states. This meant that the American frontier advanced along a single discernible line and that American institutions underwent a constant rebirth by being continuously thrown back into a primitive state. In Turner's words

"This perennial rebirth, this fluidity in American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character."

Turner saw the frontier experience as the primary reason that Americans were individualistic, materialistic, ingenious, and democratic. On the frontier new immigrants discarded their old ways and emerged as "Americans", a unique, new, improved breed of man. Because of the lure of the frontier, Turner believed that Eastern institutions were altered to become more democratic to prevent loss of population to the west. He saw the frontier process as one of evolutionary development repeated again and again on each successive frontier. The hunter was followed by the trapper and miner, who in turn was replaced by the pioneer farmer, who in turn gave way to the specialized farmer, who in turn yielded to the town or city dweller.

Turner and/or his followers saw the frontier as having at least six "noteworthy effects" on American history. First, the frontier served as a melting pot, breaking down the unique cultural differences of early immigrants and creating a composite nationality of the American people. Second, the frontier experience decreased our dependence on England, ultimately fostering a manufacturing economy as it became impractical to transport English goods deep into the interior. Third, the frontier conditioned the type of legislation enacted by the national government, creating a need for internal improvements and a protective tariff to bring "the factory to the farm." This necessitated a loose interpretation of the Constitution to respond to the unforeseen needs of the frontier. Fourth, the demand for cheap land led to the dominance of the national government over the states by requiring the survey and distribution of land and by the admitting of new states as civilization conquered savagery. Fifth, the frontier promoted democracy because the relative equality of the settlers there led to the establishment of more innovative and democratic institutions which eventually worked their way back east. Finally, the frontier served as a "safety valve," siphoning off discontent in the east and giving the disadvantaged the optimistic hope of bettering their lot. This created a more stable society by eliminating the need for the development of radical political doctrine in eastern urban centers.

Undoubtedly, the frontier thesis broadened the view of American historians and provided a new and insightful way of viewing U.S. history. The first generation of historians who followed Turner seemed to jump on the bandwagon and work to support the thesis. Gradually, critics began to emerge. In general, critics argued that Turner's thesis was at best over simplistic and at worst factually flawed. Robert Riegel, reflective of the early critics, viewed the Turner thesis as a valuable additional way of looking at American history from a different point of view, but not the only, or necessarily, correct way. Riegel criticized the frontier on several fronts.

First, he contended that there were significant exceptions to the pattern of development that Turner suggested. Riegel contended that Turner failed to emphasize the importance of the land speculator who was present on every frontier. The speculator did not intend to settle on the land but was intent on profiting from it, thus increasing the cost of the land to real settlers. Most of the land purchased by settlers was purchased from railroads or speculators rather than under provisions of the Homestead Act. Billington contends that for every newcomer who homesteaded, six purchased land from speculators.

Second, settlement of the frontier took place in times of prosperity rather than in times of hardship. This meant that the frontier did not function as a safety valve since there is little evidence that frontier settlers were drawn from the industrialized sections of the east. In fact, subsequent historical data indicates that the trend during the very period in
which Turner wrote was for rural labor to migrate toward cities. Critics contend that if there was a safety valve at all it was an urban safety valve which siphoned off excess population from the frontier.

Third, Riegel contended that innovation in technology and political institutions moved from east to west rather than the other way around. The technological innovations demanded by the frontier were largely the product of eastern initiatives. The cotton gin, telegraph, telephone, and reaper were eastern products designed to capitalize on a western market. The movement for increased democracy as well as reform movements were largely the product of European and eastern industrial societies. While the lack of identifiable social classes may have been initially present on the frontier, class structure developed quickly and political innovations such as universal suffrage, the direct primary, and women's rights were as much products of eastern and European thought as of the frontier experience. Thus, to attribute the democratic tendencies of the United States solely to the frontier experience is viewed as an oversimplification by critics.

Fourth, critics have eroded the notion that the frontier settler was drawn to the frontier by an innate love of freedom and individualism. In fact, they say, western migration was motivated by the desire to acquire wealth and it was commonly believed that wealth was more easily attainable on the frontier. Westerners desired much more help than Turner attributed to them as evidenced by communal assistance in home-building and the desire for government involvement in Indian fighting, internal improvements, and assistance in credit and banking. Critics argue that the fact that westerners desired neighbors and culture and refinement in their communities is supported by the fact that as soon as practical they took de-individualizing initiatives.

Finally, critics argue that the frontier did not serve as a melting pot. In fact, frontier settlers displayed a remarkable propensity to settle in ethnic groups and to retain their cultural and ethnic identity. Modern critics, like Patrician Limerick, have suggested that Turner placed too much emphasis on the frontier changing people rather than on people changing each other. According to this view, Turner failed to mention the influence of Native Americans, Mexican-Americans, Canadians, and other groups on the frontier settlers. This approach contends that the frontier settlers adopted accepted views of how to contend with the primitive frontier setting from those who already had knowledge of it rather than though ingenuity of their own.

It has also been suggested that Turner's frontier thesis was a product of its time. The Bureau of the Census indicated in 1890 that there was no longer a discernible line of frontier in the United States. Some have suggested that this closing of the frontier reflected a death of the traditional sense of optimism through the elimination of the view that America's resources were inexhaustible, causing a romanticized version of the frontier experience. Turner, it must be remembered, wrote before much of the Great Plains and Far West had been appreciably settled which meant that he did not take into account the later frontier experience. Many contend that his thesis, if it is applicable at all, only applies to the Old Northwest (Upper Midwest), where he grew up. Certainly it fails to deal with environmental problems such as aridity which was a dominant concern of later settlers. Notably, the thesis also fails to account for the impact of industrialization on the history of the United States, no small factor in the political, economic, and social development of the country.

So, of what importance is the frontier thesis in the study of American history? Robert Riegel says

"The question of whether Turner was correct or incorrect in his analysis of the influence of the frontier is very possibly less important than the fact that he turned men's minds from traditional and increasingly sterile investigations to fields that were fresh and rewarding."

The focus on the frontier serves as an additional perspective from which to study American history. To accept it blindly is probably no more useful than to reject it out of hand. To truly understand the development of the United States it is important to look at events from a variety of perspectives. The frontier thesis provided historians with yet another perspective from which to try to extract the true dynamics of the American experience.